

## PROLOGUE

It's a few minutes after nine o'clock, and the Flores twins are buckled into the backseat of Wilber's Toyota, lurching through downtown San Francisco in search of the courthouse. As their older brother brakes and curses his way through the flurry and gridlock of the morning commute, the twins' identical faces press against the windows, hunting for street names and building numbers. They are lost.

Their messy packet of immigration papers states the courthouse address (100 Montgomery Street) and the time they've been ordered to appear: February 19, 2014, at 10:00 a.m. Sharp, they remind themselves. Every appointment in the United States, they have learned, is expected to be on time, *en punto*, sharp. A counselor at the Texas detention center had explained this to them, and Wilber has, too. This morning they'd left the apartment with a two-hour window. It's important to be not just on time, but *early*, in the Estados Unidos, Wilber said.

"Shit," he spits from the front seat, as the network of one-ways forces him across Market Street and into the wrong side of downtown. The morning traffic roils and churns around the 4Runner, now stopped in the middle of the intersection.

At twenty-four, Wilber is now, for better or worse, for lack of a better

option, his brothers' guardian. "Will you agree to be their legal sponsor?" the woman at the shelter had asked in her Tex-Mex Spanish. Of course he would. He'd signed a paper promising to provide for their basic needs, to feed and clothe them, to enroll them in school, and to get them to court on time.

In his seven years here, he'd become somewhat of an expert on the United States and its rules. A rule of the landscaping business, for instance: no work, no pay. He'd miss another day of wages today.

New Montgomery! That's the street they've been looking for—Montgomery! They drive past strangers in coats and scarves, carrying briefcases, earbuds plugging their ears. The boys are not allowed to use earbuds in class, but Ernesto sometimes tries to sneak them in. He likes the way they make him look: cool, indifferent. New Montgomery, New Montgomery, New Montgomery. They reach the end of the street, but the numbers don't seem right. The clock is ticking.

"Maybe New Montgomery and Montgomery aren't the same?" suggests Raúl.

THE twins have been dreading this appointment for months, ever since they were picked up out of the Texas desert, their shoes ripped to raggedy flaps, their matching bodies swaying with thirst. They thought for sure they'd be deported right away, back to El Salvador and all that awaited them there.

But they weren't sent back. They were taken to a detention center, where a woman explained to them that, as minors, they'd have a choice: they could opt to go back to El Salvador on their own—*impossible*—or they could go to court and fight for the right to stay.

Court? In front of a judge? They'd need a lawyer, for starters, and the prospect of obtaining official papers seemed absurd. Why, out of all the so-called illegals like them, like their brother, should they, kids who'd been here only a few months, get papers?

It is 9:06. They have just under an hour. Wilber has plugged the address into his phone's GPS, but the place it directs them to doesn't make

sense. It seems to have stopped working altogether. Raúl snatches the phone from his twin. “Asshole,” Ernesto hisses. Raúl hands it back with a shrug.

At seventeen, the twins have never been to a city before—unless you count San Salvador, which they’d been to only a few times to visit relatives, or Mexico City, where they were practically shackled to their coyote, hunkered down in the spectral underbelly of the pass-throughs. San Francisco looms like no other place they’ve ever seen. Raúl used to picture these buildings in the quiet nights back home, rising upward like ladders, like possibilities. But now that he’s under them, they’re just endless, indistinguishable boxes. They make him feel, as most things in the United States of America so far do, small and out of place.

The twins still have the lingering feeling of being chased, of needing to look over their shoulders. Every few nights now, Ernesto wakes up screaming and slick with sweat. He won’t talk about it, but Raúl knows his brother. As surely as he knows when Ernesto feels like cutting class to go smoke a cigarette, he knows how afraid Ernesto was before he was run out of town. And during that night in the desert weeks later. The road can change a person.

The shelter staff members had explained how court works: The judge will come in, and everyone will stand up. The judge will say the name of each kid with an appointment that day, and the kid should respond *presente*, here. Last night the boys reviewed what they remembered. Look the judge in the eyes, they reminded each other. In America, their instructors told them, looking down makes you appear disrespectful.

Now the boys’ faces are hardening into matching masks of dread. When they get to court, what will they even say to the judge? With no lawyer, no English, no idea what to argue on their own behalf, they worry they’ll be deported this very day. And then what?

The courthouse is here among these buildings somewhere, but where? One hundred Montgomery, the twins read on the court paper again. Everything sounds the same—*Montgomery, Market, New Montgomery, Minna, Mission*—crossing and crisscrossing like the tacky, glinting strands of a web. Son of a bitch.

“Fucking,” Ernesto says in English, like a noun. He had learned that word, *fucking*, in school. It sounded more raw than the other swears he’d learned.

Sacramento Street, California Street, more towering stacks of steel and stone. El Salvador didn’t have buildings like this—not that they’d seen, anyway. There the streets weren’t so clean, and people tended to walk with more vigilance about their surroundings. Graffiti on the walls marked gang territory you could be killed for crossing, and masked police patrolled with M-16s and AK-47s. Teenagers like them were posted on corners, texting the bosses any strange comings and goings. In parts of some towns, hardly anyone walked at all. Here in San Francisco it was just coffee cups and commerce—but the foreignness was its own quiet form of terror.

Nine-thirty, nine-thirty-five. The numbers keep shifting on the defunct phone the twins use to keep track of time. Another confused, traffic-laden circuit loops them back to Market Street. The big white clock tower stands resolute against the bay like a cruel joke.

Wilber cranks the heat high. Outside it’s cold, and the twins haven’t brought anything to wear over their almost-matching blue plaid shirts, their nicest items of clothing. Wilber bought them, like practically everything they have. Ernesto’s is long-sleeved, a tight-fitting faux flannel, while Raúl’s is a boxier short-sleeve, his collar buttoned all the way to the top. Both boys have tucked the shirts into their skinny jeans, hiked up higher than usual with the help of belts, and they’ve laced their sneakers tightly, instead of leaving them fashionably loose-tied like the kids at school. They’ve slicked their hair back, and Ernesto has even removed his earrings—the characteristic the teachers at school use to tell them apart. They look, accidentally, like twins trying to dress as twins. Ernesto scoffed when he saw Raúl in the morning. “Copying me,” he said.

As ten o’clock approaches, Ernesto blinks rapidly, and Raúl breathes heavily through his nostrils, lips pressed into a tight, thin line.

“Shit,” says Wilber in English. He’s doing his best.

“Should we ask somebody?” Raúl finally whispers.

Ernesto shoots him a look. *Who? Who would we possibly ask?* The twins don’t speak English, and though Wilber can hold his own, how

could he pull over a car in the middle of the downtown rush? He can't get another ticket. In spite of his seven years here, Wilber feels just as much as his brothers do that *immigrant* and *illegal* are painted onto him like a sticky second skin.

"Fucking," says Ernesto. They now have ten minutes. They turn onto Mission and loop back toward Market. *We've been here before. No, we haven't. Yes, we have—look, that flower man—we saw him before. True.* Silence. On the map they see Montgomery station. If Montgomery station is here, where is the Montgomery Street courthouse? They'll miss their appointment, they'll be sent home, they'll wind up dead, and what would have been the point of any of it—the journey, the debt, all this wandering?

Ernesto wants to scream at his brother—*How long have you lived here? Can't you find us this fucking courthouse?* But his throat seems to have closed up. He blinks even faster, as if to incarnate something better to see.

At a certain point, you just give up. They boys know it at the exact same moment, as with many things, but Wilber feels it, too: it's that time, the giving-up time. It's an hour past their appointment. It's over.

"Okay," Wilber says. The twins say nothing, just watch out the windows as the throng of people drifts away, and they ascend the on-ramp to the bridge. The highway drags them above the slate-gray sea like a conveyor belt toward what is now, for now, home. They won't go to school today, probably not tomorrow. It would be too easy for Immigration to find them. But *la migra* has Wilber's address, too. They could go hide out somewhere, but Wilber is the only person here they really know.

They've been hunted by gangs, by packs of wild coyotes in the desert, by bad spirits, by rumors, by debt, by *la migra*—an easy, two-for-one prey. The twins look up at the sky as they emerge from the Yerba Buena Tunnel, which shoots them out and slings them back into Oakland. They've been chewed up and spit out all over this godforsaken continent, and after all this, just for missing an appointment, they're sure they'll be delivered back to El Salvador for good. But they can't go back.

For too long, the Flores twins have been dodging what now feels inevitable. In the jinxed maze of their lives, at the age of seventeen, they may have reached a dead end.

## THE MISSING

Enter the examination room in San Salvador's Instituto de Medicina Legal, where a masked doctor cuts into a new corpse. The ammonia fumes burn your eyes. After determining the cause of death, he'll slide the body back into the freezer until someone comes to identify the remains. If no one comes, which sometimes happens—it's too far, or the family doesn't have the money, or the deceased doesn't have a family, or the circumstances of the murder are such that it's best for the next of kin to lie low—the body will be incinerated. But any corpse in San Salvador that has gone undiscovered long enough, decomposing in a cornfield, say, or cast into the dump, is taken to the Department of Forensic Anthropology.

In contrast to the fecund, overgrown outside, the anthropology room is antiseptic, all right angles and order. Metal examination tables gleam; file boxes are stacked atop the counters and tables and floor. Like puzzle masters, the forensic anthropologists turn over the contents of each and fit the pieces together to figure how a human being turned into a box of bones.

Some of the skeletons are old and weather worn, turning the color of rust; they look as though they would flake at a touch. These bones were exhumed from the site of the 1981 massacre of El Mozote during El Salvador's civil war, when government troops stormed a suspected guerrilla haven and slaughtered more than nine hundred men, women, and children. Some they killed with guns and machetes; others they corralled into the town church, then set it on fire. This skeleton here, laid out on the butcher

paper, strewn with bits of the El Mozote soil mixed with the dust of his own bones, was a man “in his thirties,” one anthropologist estimated. “A farmer, most likely.”

The bones on the neighboring table, sturdier and whiter and in far fewer pieces, are from a newer war, a war more elusive and harder to track: the gang war.

“This one here came from a clandestine grave in San Salvador.” A pit behind a San Salvador slum. She’d been a young woman—they estimated about seventeen, killed within the last year. Based on markings inside her pelvis, she’d once given birth. In the front of the skull, just above where the girl might have tweezed her brows or dusted a shimmer of shadow, was a splintered hole.

“A heavy object,” the anthropologist says, running her fingers along the breach.

“Last week a man came in with thirty-seven bullets,” recalled a morgue administrator. “Thirty-seven! Can you imagine?”

They cut a neat rectangle out of the young mother’s femur for DNA.

It’s hard to know who the particular killers in this new war are. Most homicides—especially the mass graves, like the one from which the young mother was pulled—are known to be the work of the gangs. Yet around 95 percent of crimes in the Northern Triangle go uncharged. To report a mass grave or denounce a gang member for murder carries a near-certain death sentence for the accuser and often for his or her family, too. So people keep quiet; the bodies pile up.

At the front gate of the morgue, a woman cries quietly, her shoulders quaking as she presses a tissue beneath her eyes. She leans into a young man, her son perhaps, who wears a stiff expression behind aviator sunglasses. The armed guards notice, then look away.

A different woman enters the gate. “I’m here to register a disappeared?” she says, like a question. She signs her name in the tattered logbook, and the guard points where to go with one hand, holding his gun with the other.

If your local police haven't found the person you're looking for, you go to the morgue to make another report. The Instituto de Medicina Legal staff affixes the photograph to a wall, along with dozens of others. They hang beneath a plastic cover so clean it reflects the onlooker, a flickering superimposition against the black and white faces of adults and children arranged by date last seen. THESE PHOTOGRAPHS WILL BE KEPT ON THIS BILLBOARD FOR TWO MONTHS, DEPENDING ON SPACE, the sign explains. It is late July; April's disappeared have just been taken down.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION, the sign concludes.

A police truck pulls into the compound, and two officers, clad in boots and balaclavas, hop out and escort a scowling young man, no more than sixteen or seventeen. He is handcuffed, his hair is gelled into spikes, and he sports low-sagging shorts, barely laced high-top sneakers, and a bright red T-shirt. The police move him roughly toward one of the doors.

"A gangster," someone says after he passes.

"They get a psychological evaluation here," the guard explains, "before going to jail."

The courts are so backed up that this young man could be in jail for weeks, months, even years before a trial. Thus he, too, becomes one of San Salvador's missing.



## CHAPTER 1

**Y**ou boys from eighteen?” one of the young men said, pointing his gun toward the retaining wall marked by a small graffiti tag:  
BARRIO 18.

It was 2008. The Flores twins, twelve, were playing poker on the town soccer field with their older brother and six friends when the pickup pulled up. Ten or so guys stood in the truck bed brandishing guns and machetes, sporting hip-hop clothes and tattoos. They were MS-13, or Mara Salvatrucha, the twins knew—members of the gang that was then slinking into the small town of La Colonia. The Flores boys and their friends were high on adrenaline from having won a big soccer match that morning, a feeling that mixed nicely with the bravado of early adolescence. But the sight of the armed men scared them silent.

They shook their heads no.

“I asked you a question!” barked the guy in the truck.

Ernesto’s gaze was lowered, but he could feel the men staring down at him.

“I asked if you fuckers were from eighteen!” the man shouted. At that, one of their friends took off running into the woods. Suddenly—they couldn’t remember who moved first—the twins were sprinting through the forest that flanked the town soccer field, Ernesto first, Raúl

close behind, panting and flying over dips and gullies, pushing past banana trees and crashing through the tall grasses while shouts and a scatter of gunshots crackled behind them.

Running away from a truck of gangsters was either an admission of guilt (in this case, allegiance to the rival Barrio 18 gang) or, at the very least, a sign of a lack of respect for MS-13 authority.

When the shouts felt far enough away, the twins hit the ground, lying on their bellies in the brush. They stayed there for what felt like several hours—until they were sure the truck was gone. They were too scared to go back to the field and look for their cards, which, for anyone *vigilando*, or keeping watch over the area, might tag the twins as the ones who ran. For a while, at least, no more poker.

THE road to La Colonia is meandering but smooth, thanks to the scant traffic. It weaves through a tangle of greenery: vines overhang concrete walls alongside tall, tight rows of banana trees, diaphanous canopies of *barillos*, pink flowering cacao, dense *cedro negro*, and flushing palms. The road begins in a valley and winds upward to where La Colonia, about thirty miles from San Salvador and home to fewer than four thousand people, spreads up and around the slopes of a gentle, low hill.

The houses along the road are simple but comfortable, built from concrete, many of them painted colors that were once bright—ice blue, cotton candy pink, white with fuchsia trim—but that now, with weather and time and dust, have faded. Less fortunate homes speckle back into the adjacent hills and farmland. Flags of the conservative ARENA party flap from electric poles and appear painted on buildings. Along the road stand La Colonia's schools—two high schools and an elementary school. One of only about a dozen Flores family photos is of the twins and their older sister, somber-faced and gangly beneath too-big dress clothes, on the proud occasion of their ninth-grade graduation.

Cows use the road as often as people do, lashed together by the horns and plodding along between farm and pasture, and dogs warm themselves in the middle of the street looking like splayed corpses. At the sound of approaching cars they rise, shake themselves, and lumber off

to where the road turns to dirt. During harvesttime, families turn the two-lane road into one as they lay their bean pods and corn out to dry, the kernels spread like a blanched mosaic along the tarmac.

The road crests the hill and begins to dip downward, and that's where the Flores home sits, a stone house lined with crumbling stucco. From there it's not much farther to the center of town, a sleepy square rimmed by a block or two of houses and a few businesses—family-run restaurants, sundries shops, the mayor's office. The high-rising church is the town's main attraction, its tower wielding a hulking cross that casts a daily shadow into the central square. At noon the church bells chime.

Until the twins were teenagers, the town center was frequented day and night. Kids ran around the small playground, people took refuge on the shaded benches, and boys played soccer on the open concrete court, even in the afternoon heat. People came to use the copy shop or buy soap or soda or enter a complaint at the mayor's office. Children who'd begged spare change from their parents bought snow cones from the heavyset woman with the mobile stand, the bright, tacky syrup staining their faces. The *pupuserías* were open until eleven, midnight even, playing music and serving sodas and beers, the lady proprietors flipping the cakes of corn *masa* against the griddle until the edges were crispy yellow-brown.

"It was a beautiful town," Raúl remembers. "It was."

LIKE the rest of the farmers in La Colonia, the twins' father, Wilber, regarded the mountain and its fertile land as a divine inheritance. The land was good to him; God provided. This was Wilber's credo. "The way to survive this world is to stay close to God," he said to his children. "And keep *manos limpias*": clean hands.

Wilber carried a small Bible in his pocket at all times, the binding frayed and worn from use. Tucked inside were several prayer cards, his Salvadoran national ID, the photo taken when he was a very young man, and a picture of his bride, Esperanza, now faded and tattered. Every now and then he'd pull out the keepsakes to have a look.

“See how young you were!” he’d say. Esperanza tittered like a girl, waving her hand as if shooing a fly.

Wilber and Esperanza had always wanted a big family, but for many years they’d felt they might be cursed. They got married in the midst of the country’s civil war, in 1985, and when Esperanza gave birth to her first baby, Ricardo, two years later, the war still raged. La Colonia wasn’t a hot zone, but soldiers marched through it on occasion. This never meant anything good for poor farmers like the Flores family, whom the government often suspected of being guerrillas. “The soldiers came looking for people,” Esperanza explained. “They could mistake you for someone else and punish you for something they did.”

Once when Wilber was out of town working on another farm’s harvest, news spread that the army was on its way. Esperanza snatched up Ricardo, who was barely a year old, and walked out of town up into the hills, where she stayed along with some neighbors for a couple of days, hoping Ricardo didn’t cry too loudly. The army passed through without fireworks or massacres. Esperanza came down from the mountain, and they resumed their lives at home.

It was a dirty war, as Wilber put it—a war between the rightist government, beholden to the country’s powerful oligarchy and operating with brute military force, and the mounting leftist guerrilla movement, fighting for the interests of the impoverished working class, especially the country’s rural farmers. But the Flores family thought it best to stay out of politics.

In cities and in the countryside, mutilated bodies showed up in the streets. Political prisoners—dead and alive—were heaved off the Devil’s Gate cliff in the dense hills above San Salvador. Both sides played dirty, but the government death squads were brutal: a UN-appointed truth commission report asserts, with some contestation from within El Salvador, that 85 percent of the atrocities were carried out by the government. In the early 1980s, the United States trained and backed the government forces—death squads and all—to prevent a guerrilla takeover: an effort, in the thick of the Cold War, to prevent the proximal spread of Communism.

“It was a terrible time,” Wilber says. He won’t say much else about the war.

In 1988, as the violence heated toward its final boil, Esperanza gave birth to another son: Wilber Jr. Then, as peace negotiations were under way in Mexico City, she gave birth to a daughter who died at just several weeks old. They buried her in La Colonia. Esperanza kept praying for more children, placing offerings upon the altar and asking God and the Mother Mary for their blessings every Sunday in church. The peace accords were signed in Mexico City in 1992, and as the government and the guerrillas agreed to lay down their weapons for good, Esperanza got pregnant again. This baby, too, died at just several weeks old, and another after that made it only a few days before she turned blue and they had to bury her as well. Was Esperanza cursed? Was she too old?

In 1994 El Salvador held its first free and fair peacetime elections. The conservative ARENA party won, but the war was over. After so many years of conflict, it was a time of rebuilding. That year Esperanza’s prayers were answered: she gave birth to her sixth child, a girl, Maricela. Maricela lived.

The Flores family were still farmers who scraped by harvest to harvest, who struggled to find money to buy clothes or take a child to the doctor. But as Esperanza looked back, she regarded those as good years: three healthy babies, a country out of war.

Then the curse reared again: another baby, who died another mysterious death just a few weeks after he was born. That made seven children in all, only three of whom had made it to a year. In a place with little medical care, tragedies like this were common enough, but four tested Esperanza’s faith. At the end of 1995, when her belly began to swell again a few months after the fourth baby died, she prayed she wouldn’t lose this one, too.

After a bit of nausea early on, she had a good feeling—this one, she thought, would keep. The closest doctor was a thirty-minute drive away, and anyway, she couldn’t afford him. Prayer was more important, she felt in the end. Within just three months she was bigger than she’d ever been at that stage. By month five she was exhausted, walking

wide-legged, having to heave herself out of the bed each morning to feed the children and scatter corn for the chickens. She'd squat to tug at the cow's udders for milk, her back aching, her knees on fire.

Wilber prayed for her at church, crooned hymns and strummed the guitar in the front of the congregation. He worried that the bigness and the fatigue were due to her age, mid-thirties, so he put more offerings onto their altar—corn, beans, flowers from the blooming trees, and vines around their house, a plump orange, a twin tomato. God was good. He'd let them keep this one.

"Look how big I am!" Esperanza boasted. Must be a boy, some neighbors said. She was eating so well after the year's good harvest. Maybe she was further along than she thought?

Esperanza had her own quiet suspicions. She didn't want to jinx it, but she thought she might be carrying two. It wasn't just the taut globe of her belly; she had a warm, warbling sense of it in her heart.

They saved up some money. When it neared her time to give birth, she took the bus down to the hospital, where they listened to her stomach and brought a picture onto the screen.

"Twins," the nurse said.

She'd been right. There were two little bodies, the thump of two heartbeats. Fifteen days later she went into labor. Ernesto slipped into the world first, screeching. She felt relief and then a wild need to push again. She labored the other baby out twelve minutes later—Raúl. Two identical creatures, writhing, their brown-pink bodies slick with birth. The nurses brought them both into her arms. They'd make it, she thought.

FROM the minute they were born, the twins were inseparable. First it was a matter of circumstance—they slept side by side and lay swaddled on the floor together. Then, when they got older, they rolled around on the same blanket, learning first to babble, then to form words. Even as they evolved their own personalities, they resisted being apart. Ernesto and Raúl wanted to sit next to each other in school, to eat together on the floor or the rock ledge behind the house, to walk side by side down

the road to school, to work with their father in the fields in the same shifts.

When they were infants, Esperanza liked to wrap them in matching blankets and hold them one in each arm like prizes. She dressed them identically, opting to buy new clothes in sets of two rather than use hand-me-downs, despite the extra cost. When Ernesto and Raúl began to toddle down the road holding their mother's hands, neighbors and the occasional stranger would fall into prayer upon seeing them: two identical people. A miracle. Everyone in the town knew it and that the miracle belonged to Esperanza Flores.

Their older brothers took on the responsibility of keeping them safe.

"I'll be in charge of Ernesto, and you be in charge of Raúl," Ricardo declared to younger Wilber, who took it as an order. As they watched their brothers play with trucks in the yard, or chase chickens, or snatch things out of each other's hands, both older brothers rooted for their respective twin to win.

Teachers and family friends had a hard time distinguishing them. The siblings knew which was which, most of the time—Ernesto had a tiny mole under his eye, an easy tell from close range. But since they were most often together, it was easier to refer to them as one: the *gemelos*, the twins.

WHEN the twins were ten, Esperanza developed a cough and began cooking outside in the back courtyard, letting the twins take over the sooty former kitchen as their bedroom. They were delighted: a space of their own.

A few years earlier, Wilber had put the brothers to work in the *milpa*. There was Wilber's own land, two separate plots where they grew the corn and beans and tomatoes, and then the land they leased from the twins' godfather, who allowed them to plant there on his behalf and take home half the yield. Wilber Sr. needed all the workers he could get. For one thing, he and Esperanza had more mouths to feed: since the twins, they had had Lucia, then Marina, then Pablo, then Luis. A family of eleven was large even for La Colonia. Wilber also wanted his

kids to understand how to make a living off the land. Work would keep them out of trouble.

The twins got up with the sun and spent the mornings in the field, then went to school for the afternoon session. This was the norm; because of overcrowding, which really meant underfunding, Salvadoran children attend school only half a day, either morning or afternoon. After school the twins' job was to take care of the livestock.

While Raúl was all playfulness, Ernesto could be severe, quick to snap at anyone he felt had done him wrong. Ernesto was also more socially attuned: he studied the older and more popular boys at school as if learning the customs of a new land. Raúl made friends easily enough but wasn't all that worried about being included. Ernesto also loved sports, while Raúl was the artsy one, often preferring drawing to football, and later taking to painting in art class at school. As they rooted into their own personalities, the contours of their faces seemed to change ever so slightly: Raúl's now appeared softer, more wide-eyed, whereas Ernesto was furrow-browed with a cultivated toughness. If Raúl saw his brother's temper beginning to surge, he'd smack Ernesto's arm with two fingers and run away to distract him from his rage. Often, it worked.

"There's always a difference with twins," their mother explained. She had Raúl's innocent laugh, accompanied by a shoulder jiggle and the squinting of her eyes. "That's what they say. . . . It happens in the womb. One taller, the other shorter, one is funny, the other angry."

"I'm the angel, and you're the devil," Raúl joked.

Ernesto conceded—he was indeed rougher around the edges. "But I'm the older one, so I have to be more serious and in charge." They argued over who was taller, using their hairdos to claim additional centimeters.

BY fourth grade, the twins ran with a steady pack of six boys from school. They floated in and out of the others' graces as if with the seasons. The pack liked to pick on each other, play pranks, and call each other names—monster, bitch—but the twins felt the others picked on them more often and cut deeper.



“You’re too poor for shoes. Look at those shoes—they’re falling apart.”

“Stupid asshole.”

“Dark-ass peasant boys.”

It was unfair, the twins felt, because many of these guys were even poorer than they were.

“Just stay away from them,” their classmate Edgar warned. A nice boy, quiet and self-effacing, he was a steadier friend than the pack of six. Still, Ernesto, in particular, was drawn to the group. Probably they were just jealous, the twins reasoned—a common Flores family explanation for bad human behavior. But their friends jeered at them often enough that other boys at school caught on.

“Your father’s a beggar with that guitar of his,” one bully, Silvio, declared. Wilber played guitar in church and sometimes sang hymns on the street, his croaky voice thick with devotion. The other kids cackled. No one came to their defense.

The teachers did little to protect them and in fact sometimes joined in at poking fun at them or their father. When a notebook appeared in the classroom scrawled with obscenities, which Ernesto knew to be Silvio’s handiwork—he’d seen him do it—the teacher pointed the finger at Ernesto.

“Why did you do this?” he demanded.

“It wasn’t me!” Ernesto insisted.

“Then who was it?” But he wouldn’t dare say. The teacher sent him home.

Raúl wasn’t in trouble, but he followed his brother back up the hill without a second thought.

“They’re always blaming us,” Ernesto complained on the way home. Raúl nodded.

Another day a kid hit Ernesto in the temple with a rock. He’d thrown it on purpose. It bled and left a bruise for days; he’d have the scar there forever. When Esperanza asked what happened, Ernesto lied—he’d fallen playing soccer, he said, and Raúl corroborated.

Their own relatives fueled the bullying, too. Wilber’s half-sister, Graciela, had long looked down on Wilber, and things had got even worse

when she'd married Don Agustín, a man from another town. Agustín was now one of the town's big men, a guy with more land and disposable cash than most and thus holder of a healthy dose of small-town power. He and Graciela had a spacious house up the road from Wilber's, a slick, well-running truck, and a profitable coffee crop. To them, Wilber's too-big family was a laughingstock and an embarrassment. As the twins grew up, they were invited to fewer weddings and family parties, then none. Their grandfather made no effort to see them.

In 2010 their uncle's house was robbed—people knew he had money. So Uncle Agustín arranged for a private security force: he would now be protected by gangs.

THEY heard about it on the news first. Bodies found dumped in secret grave sites, police officers murdered, women raped and slaughtered and left in the streets. Gang violence had spread throughout El Salvador like an invasive bloom. The gangs were growing their armies by recruiting kids, particularly in San Salvador but in smaller surrounding cities, too. The twins heard stories of beheadings and shootings of murdered police. The whole world around them began to tremble.

The first of the infamous (and infamously Salvadoran) gangs had formed in the United States among Salvadoran exiles, mostly undocumented youth who had fled violence and forced military recruitment during the civil war. They formed allegiances in the image of other Los Angeles gangs of the 1980s and '90s. Like the Italian mafia and the Irish gangs that rose to power in the early twentieth century, their lower ranks comprised young immigrants with limited economic options in a society trying to keep them out. Thousands of young men in Los Angeles were incarcerated then deported back to El Salvador, and along with them came the gang culture.

In El Salvador, the gangs made their money off low-level drug deals and extortion, charging businesses and individuals a biweekly fee called *renta*, or rent. Most of the gangster ground troops were young, poor guys not unlike the twins. Some kids chose to join, while others fell into it unwittingly, asked to do favors here and there until they were in too

deep to retreat. Joining could be a seduction—poor, parentless, or abused children were lured into a place of belonging with an opportunity to become a big person, someone with means and power whom others respected and feared. Gang life did bring power and respect, but at great cost. Many of the gang leaders ran things from prison, and though the guys working the streets acquired minor trappings of success—nicer clothes, a phone—they stayed poor. Theirs was a status born of intimidation and fear, maintained by punishing anyone who crossed them and, often, by making sure that punishment was made public.

As a *New York Times* article would put it some years later, “El Salvador has been brought to its knees by an army of flies.”

When the twins had been ten, a cousin of theirs was shot. He’d been crazy, they’d always been told—a thief. He’d gotten on the wrong side of the gangs. The following year the body of an estranged uncle of theirs was found in the river a few miles away. He’d been a drunk who would show up at the house from time to time, slurring and demanding food, and rumor had it that he’d joined one of the gangs. When they found him, he was cut up in pieces.

Signs of gang activity started to show up in town, too. One day they noticed MS-13 graffiti on a signpost between the main road and their house. They walked home more quickly then, heads down.

Kids began talking about *la violencia* and *la delincuencia* in school. “You know if it’s a gangster because they dress good,” one of their classmates said one day.

“If you’re in a gang, you get rich,” another explained. It didn’t matter that it wasn’t true; the perception of power was tied up in the perception of wealth. The twins nodded knowingly.

Classmates started to throw gang signs. Hard to know, at first, whether they were just posing, but you didn’t mess with a kid who pledged any kind of allegiance, even if you suspected it was just for show. They watched who changed their style—who had the slick clothes, the confident swagger, the phone—and who was texting more often, loitering on the side of the road or in town. Were they *vigilando*, keeping watch?

The half-day of school suited agricultural families like the Floreses,

but it left many other children unoccupied, out in the streets or the marketplace, vulnerable for recruitment. As the twins grew up, more youths were recruited by sheer force. A kid was told that if he didn't join, the gangs would kill him or his mother, or rape his sister. The gangs did enough throughout the country to intimidate in La Colonia without having to do much actual damage those early years. The specter of violence was powerful enough.

The twins' parents didn't say much about the gangs, preferring, as always, to keep their distance. Their father reminded them, as they shoveled and pulled from the ground, that work would keep their hands clean.

OUT in the morning sun, Wilber Jr.—the second Flores son—plotted his escape from La Colonia. He turned the central problem over and over in his mind as he worked the *milpa*. He loved his parents, but they had been irresponsible. Really, nine children? As his siblings multiplied and grew, the household's resources were stretched thin—toward the end of the seasonal rations and before the next harvest, even food was scarce. The year before, their godfather had ended the land-sharing arrangement, and so they were growing less food. Meanwhile, the country was becoming more dangerous, it seemed, every day.

One spring day during his final year of high school, Wilber took the bus to a neighboring town to take the entrance exam for university. This was his escape plan. He concentrated, terrified of failure. But he passed. He figured he could raise enough money working some nearby coffee harvests to pay for his schooling.

Right before he enrolled in a nearby college, his dad called him into his bedroom. It was evening, and Esperanza was outside cooking dinner.

“Son,” he said, “do you want to go to the North?”

Like all Salvadorans who'd grown up after the massive exodus—over 350,000 people—of the civil war years, Wilber held a reverence for El Norte. “The North” was an often starry-eyed euphemism for the United States, where work and money and opportunity, despite messages sent back home to the contrary, were abundant.

Wilber Sr. could support only so many kids. He hadn't offered this to his eldest son, Ricardo, but instead to Wilber, his namesake. Ricardo had developed a drinking problem, and Wilber Jr. figured his father worried about what would happen to him if he were to be let loose in the United States. His father must have recognized that his second son was a hard worker with big dreams outside La Colonia. Of course he wanted to go. Though he worried Ricardo might be jealous, he couldn't second-guess this opportunity on account of his brother's pride.

"It's heaven up there," Wilber Jr. told the twins. He wanted to help support his family, but more than anything, he wanted to go to school in the United States. His plan was to learn English, enroll in college, make extra money to send back home, and earn his degree. It would be hard at first, sure, but in time he knew he could work his way up that ladder of the American Dream.

His father arranged a coyote to guide Wilber Jr. north through Mexico. To pay the coyote, he borrowed \$6,000 from a shady local lender. Wilber Jr. understood that he alone was responsible for the debt, and would have to pay this off as soon as possible so the interest didn't swallow the family. But within a couple weeks he'd be in the United States, he figured, and after a couple more, he'd have a job and be sending money home, probably hundreds of dollars each month. (He had heard there were jobs for nine dollars an hour in California—a fortune.) In 2007, when the twins were eleven years old and Wilber was eighteen, he left for the North. Wilber Sr. slipped a small photograph of his son—a school portrait in black and white from when he was nine or ten years old, hair combed neatly to one side—into his fraying pocket Bible.

Wilber made it across on his first try. He called with the news that he'd reached San Jose, where they had a friend with whom he could stay, who had promised to help him find a job. That Sunday at church, the family thanked God for shepherding his passage.

WILBER Jr. had become a *hermano lejano*, a faraway brother—a Salvadoran who had left the country and—most often—crossed into the United States. Along the road to the San Salvador International Airport

stands a large arc of stone with a sign reading WELCOME, FARAWAY BROTHER!

But they often don't return. El Salvador is home to 6.34 million people; nearly 2 million Salvadorans resided in the United States in 2013—a third of the country's population, a higher percentage than even Mexico's. In 2015 the country's exports totaled \$5.5 billion, and the total from foreign remittances, nearly all from the United States, was approximately \$4 billion. As the mayor of San Salvador put it, "El Salvador's biggest export is people."

Ernesto had lost his big brother guardian, the one who always picked him to be on his team, the one who rooted for him and defended him and joked around with him. His sadness at this loss was laced with resentment: Wilber had this whole adventure ahead of him and was leaving his brothers behind to take over his share of the work. They'd probably never see him again.

*It's terrible to lose your kid to the North*, thought Wilber Sr. the day his son rode away in the coyote's car. Yet he felt he'd made the right decision. He blamed the growth of the cities for this hemorrhaging of Salvadorans. So much of the fertile land—good earth, land he used to work as a migrant farmhand in his youth, before he married Esperanza—had been turned into houses, factories, urban sprawl. The sugarcane fields of Nuevo Cuscatlán, the coffee terraces that swept through Santa Tecla, were all now houses and stores, a big, dead carpet of metropolis. No wonder there were no jobs for young people, no wonder food was so expensive: the earth was being used up.

NOW that Wilber Jr. was gone, the twins had to guard the farm at night, sometimes sleeping in the barn and sometimes on the naked hillside under the stars. It was scary out there, the two of them alone, listening for rustles that could be crop thieves, or the armadillos that ruined the tomato plants, or bad spirits. For the first two threats they carried *bombas*, innocuous but deafening little fireworks the size of AA batteries.

The idea of robbers didn't scare them so much—they weren't really dangerous, just other poor people looking to swipe something to

eat. What really scared them were the ghosts. Once, when they had lit a candle in a little shack near the barn, a long shadow emerged from nowhere. Raúl couldn't talk or breathe, as though he'd been muted by some sinister force. Ernesto, alarmed, looked at his brother, who pointed at the wall. The shadow grew longer—until all of a sudden the candle blew out. The boys ran out of the shack screaming.

“Someone committed suicide in there,” their godfather told them. “He hanged himself.” They never slept in that shack again. When the sky striped yellow-blue with dawn, the boys would stretch, dust themselves off, roll up their blankets, and head back to their home for breakfast. After a few more hours of sleep, they'd pull on their uniforms and go to school.

WHEN the twins were in seventh grade, a new kid moved to town. He and Ernesto got along well, even though the boy, Miguel, was a couple of years older. People whispered that Miguel's dad was a gangster, but then again, people said Ernesto and Raúl's dad was a beggar. Ernesto started hanging out with Miguel at the soccer fields after school, and, as usual, Raúl tagged along. Miguel didn't seem like a gangster. He sometimes asked Ernesto and Raúl if he could take some of the tomatoes and corn from the fields home to his family. They always said yes. Within a few months they became friends with his crew from the high school. These older guys didn't pick on them at first, which was a relief.

The twins started working the coffee harvests in the nearby plantations, picking the beans until their fingers ached but earning extra cash to buy school supplies, clothes, and eventually a small, pay-as-you-go, Internet-capable cellphone. (This they wanted primarily as a status symbol and so they could sign up for Facebook.) One harvest they worked on Uncle Agustín's coffee plantation. Agustín's kids, their older cousins Juan and Javier, had made an offer to them to come and work, which felt akin to a social invitation. But when payday came, Agustín stiffed them, paying them only a fraction of what they should have received. He just looked at them and handed over a few dollars for many days of work, as if daring them to challenge him. They wouldn't, and he knew it.

“He thinks he can do whatever he wants because he’s with the gangsters,” Raúl complained in a hushed voice as they walked home, famished and exhausted.

“He can,” Ernesto spat.

They had stopped asking their father why his side of the family hated them so much. They knew that from Wilber Sr.’s perspective, it was good old-fashioned envy. He was a good worker, and he suspected his family resented his leaving their plantation to work his own farm. One day up on the hill he told his children, as though recounting a fairy tale, that he’d come upon a windfall of money buried underground that allowed him to buy the land, and had inherited another small parcel from his grandmother on the other side of the family. Whatever the truth of the story, to Wilber it explained everything—jealousy, plain and simple. To Ernesto and Raúl, however, it was clear enough that their cousins were ashamed of them.

Juan and Javier passed on the notion of the twins’ inferiority to other people in town, including the twins’ classmates and friends. Miguel, they found out, had started hanging out with their cousins. It didn’t take long for the teasing and taunting to take root within Miguel’s group, too.

“Fuck off,” one of them would say to one of the twins, with a voice more cutting than usual, and for a few days the twins would be excluded. But it would pass, and the twins and those who tormented them, occasionally even Juan and Javier, would play soccer again, would walk home from school together, and would scramble together down to the river for a swim and, as the years went on, for a smoke. Passing Delta menthols around for deep, icy-hot drags signified belonging and status, for a while at least. Even as more staid friends like Edgar from school stuck with them, the twins—Ernesto, in particular—clung to the prospect of being a real part of this inner circle.

Eventually, Miguel admitted to Ernesto that his father was in a gang. He told him that his dad had tattoos marking his allegiance to MS-13 and kept guns in the house. Still, they lived poor—even after all the tomatoes and beans the Floreses had given to Miguel, they once watched as Miguel’s dad robbed their corn crop. They never said anything, mostly



out of fear, but also out of shame on his behalf. It was upsetting to be stolen from but even more humiliating to have to steal in order to eat. Is that what gang life amounted to, stealing corn?

They were also a little afraid of Miguel, when it came down to it. They avoided going to his house, making up excuses about having to work on the farm.

IT'S hard to know whether the men in the truck that day had been seriously out to get them, or if they were just messing with a pack of boys playing cards, flaunting their power and stoking fear. But the threat felt real enough to the twelve-year-old twins.

Meanwhile the boys sprouted into adolescence, growing taller and ganglier, a dark fuzz taking root along their upper lips and chins. They took a liking to girls, and their slim boy arms hardened into small bumps of biceps. A year or so after the truck incident, the twins went to the river for a swim to cool off before getting to work in the fields. When they came through the brush onto the main road, a pack of young men—all well-dressed bluster and darting eyes—started following them.

They recognized one of the guys as their rumored half-brother, Wilber's supposed son with a woman before Esperanza. Wilber denied the boy was his, but who knew. Either way, this guy had always seemed to hate the Flores family. The twins had heard rumors that he had fallen in with Juan and Javier and had clicked into the local MS-13 ring. When the twins saw him leading the pack, they quickened their pace.

By now, gangs were no longer confined to the communities of deportees sent back from Los Angeles in the 1990s. They were a large-scale network of small-time criminals, decentralized but with affiliates all across the world. The local shot-callers were people the community knew but often only by reputation, their nicknames so cliché as to be almost comical—Shaggy, the Little Devil of Hollywood, the Boxer. They were shadow kings, spellbinding their countrymen with reverence and fear. By the time the twins were run-walking down the road with a pack of young men in pursuit, La Colonia was a full-fledged MS-13 territory.

Around the region, sometimes in their own town, people were shot

and left in the bushes, their corpses half-rotten by the time they were found. Heads were cut off, the corpses left out in the center of towns for all to see. Bodies turned up sprayed with so many bullets that practically none of the torso remained. When they heard the brutal reports, Wilber would sigh. Devil's work. "We're at war again," he said, shaking his head. "Only this—it's a dry war." A war between the government and the gangs, and between the gangs and each other.

The twins turned back to look, hoping their followers would be gone, but there they still were, stone-faced, gaining on them. Finally they approached a friend's house and ducked inside to call the police. The pack staked out across the street. The twins could see them from the windows, waiting. Summoning the police might only invite retribution later, but ultimately they figured they couldn't get home otherwise, so they made the call. The police never came. Eventually the guys across the street left. The twins sprinted home and stayed indoors that night, asking Ricardo to take their shift up on the hill.

That crew never bothered Ernesto and Raúl again, though they saw them around town. Afterward the twins spent less time outside and more time at home, stealing balls from their younger siblings and playing in the back courtyard. The town square grew quieter as people moved around La Colonia with more care. Practically no one was out at night anymore: one wouldn't dare.

WILBER Jr. called from time to time, though the twins rarely talked to him. He had got a landscaping job and sent monthly payments until his \$6,000 coyote debt was gone. Then they heard from him less and less. He sent some money now and then—\$50, \$100, \$200. These infusions of cash allowed them to buy rice and milk and sugar to supplement their dwindling harvest. But then the money would be finished, and they wouldn't hear from Wilber for several months.

"He only helped himself," their sister Maricela said. The twins had to agree.

Esperanza was more generous; she didn't fault her son. "The dream is always more difficult when you're awake," she said.

THE FAR AWAY BROTHERS

The dream could easily snare a person in its gravitational tug. Edgar, their quiet, steadfast friend from school, had never mentioned going north. And yet one day, as the twins scurried to his familiar door, his mother stopped them.

“Edgar’s not here,” she said.

“Where is he?” they asked.

“He went to the North,” she said, and shut the door.

## THE FLOOD

It's January 2011, and Osmin, a teenager living in Santa Ana, El Salvador, walks with a limp. "They shot him in the leg," his younger sister explains—*they* being shorthand for the gangs. Their mother sells tortillas in the market, where *they* are everywhere. Crowded markets are excellent for running goods back and forth, for collecting rent, for recruitment, for generally keeping an eye on things. Santa Ana's main market abuts the bus terminal, and Santa Ana itself, El Salvador's second-largest city, is a key point on the way north to Guatemala—a strategic transit zone through which to run drugs and people.

Osmin's leg has mostly healed, and his step will balance out. Whatever got him shot seems to be worked out for now. But he wants—he says he *needs*—to get out of El Salvador. In 2011 homicide here will reach an all-time high—4,354 people will be murdered by the end of the year, numbers rivaling those of the civil war.

He's been lucky so far, but luck lasts only so long. He's got to go. "I just have to figure out how," he says.

He means how to get the money. Once you have the cash, he knows, getting out is easy enough to arrange.

Between 1980 and 1990, the most brutal years of the civil war, approximately 371,000 Salvadorans migrated to the United States, out of a population of around 5 million—7 percent of the country's overall population. Looking for both refuge and economic opportunity, they moved north in a steady stream, some illegally

and some availing themselves of Temporary Protective Status, an immigration relief offered to Salvadorans as a result of the war.

But violence and instability beget migration, and just as violence often begets more violence, migration often begets more migration. After the war, Salvadorans kept leaving—for economic opportunity, to reunite with family, and because an earthquake and several hurricanes leveled homes, destroyed livelihoods, and sent people packing. By 2008, 1.1 million foreign-born Salvadorans lived in the United States, or 18 percent of El Salvador’s entire population that year.

In 2009, the year before Osmin was shot and began to think of leaving, several thousand minors like him struck out from El Salvador for the North. This, in itself, was not news; it was more or less the same number as previous years. But in the fall of 2011, the number of kids leaving El Salvador for the United States skyrocketed. Osmin has friends, neighbors, and family members who are going or have gone. The same is true all over the so-called Northern Triangle. In those other countries, Osmin has heard, gang violence is spiraling out of control, just like where he lives.

The solo, underage crossers are what the U.S. media has begun to call “unaccompanied minors,” and what the U.S. government officially terms “unaccompanied alien children”—kids traveling alone, without papers or parents, and crossing the border into the United States. By the end of fiscal year 2012, the number of unaccompanied minors nabbed by *la migra* and turned over to the Office of Refugee Resettlement will nearly double to 13,625. Twenty-seven percent of 2012’s unaccompanied minors will be from El Salvador—almost four thousand more *hermanitos lejanos*, faraway little brothers and sisters.

Meanwhile the number of “illegal immigrant” adults is going down in almost inverse proportion to the rise in unaccompanied alien children: from 1.1 million adult apprehensions in 2005 to 326,034 in 2012. With the tanking of the U.S. economy, why go north to beg for jobs that aren’t there?

There will be 13,625 unaccompanied minors in 2012.

And 24,668 in 2013.

The next year it will climb to 57,496.

“I just have to figure out how to go,” Osmin repeats. It’s the children now, not so much the adults, the parents, who are moving north.